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Instrument teacher's narrative identity and professional growth

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to discover the dynamics of a music educator's identity formation and the preconditions of professional growth in her life. The music educator's profession was described through her stories and beliefs.

First, the research task was to determine when and why individual/social sources of self were successful (dominant) at particular times in her life. Second, the task was to determine when and why certain changes in her life occurred. The instrument teacher had worked at different music institutes and had recently retired.

The data has been collected through an episodic, in depth-interview. The data consists of meaningful episodes in the teacher's life and her beliefs on different themes in this study. The data analysis strategies included paradigmatic analysis of narratives and narrative analysis.

According to the results, the success of instrument teacher's sources of individual/social selves was defined by her efforts to achieve harmony. Aspirations to achieve integrity arise from the need to define oneself. Thus, answering the question who a person is requires individual/social definitions. According to this study, progression in her professional growth is a maturing process. First, it involved getting to know herself, second, committing to herself and finally achieving autonomy. The instrument teacher's profession is characterized by a relationship between personas. According to her story, instrument teaching is a lifelong preoccupation.

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1. Introduction

This is a case study of one instrument teacher; it is a narrative identity and professional growth life story. The qualitative research material has been collected through narrative episodic depth-interviews. According to the intersubjective concept of identity, both an individual's inner life and the social environment are to be equally acknowledged when identity is studied (Moss & Pittaway, 2013). An individual represents his or her culture and is defined in different circumstances and contexts, simultaneously both faithful to the self and bound to others (Bruner, 1983 according to Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1996.) Identity is on the one hand distinct from the social environment and on the other embedded in it (Henkel, 2005).

The narrative construction of identity or narrative processing of identity consists of defining oneself with a means of narration. In it the individual's self is gradually constructed with narration and re-narration (Heikkinen & Huttunen, 2002, 174). In this unique process, individual and social sources of self are in a continuous dialogue that is bound to the surroundings (Gudmundsdottir, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008, 122–125; Josselson & Lieblich 1995, 32–33; Hirvonen, 2003, 365; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Taylor 1994, 32–34, 37.) In this study the narrative environment means all the surroundings to which a person is related, excluding a person's experiences concerning his or her own features of personality or competence.

2. Identity formation

The dynamics of the self's individual and social sources can be analysed based on what the individual aims at in defining the self at a given time. The endeavours can be seen in an individual's actions. In the construction of a successful story of self, an individual can strive for both selfhood and identity; while on the one hand selfhood emphasizes a story of the self's individual sources, on the other hand it relates to an emphasis on the self's social sources. When striving to identify with sameness, the individual is attached to the society and when striving for selfhood, the individual separates him- or herself from the society (Ricoeur, 1992, 68–69, 116; Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

The story of the self's success is in touch with the individual's capability to be conscious of him- or herself (McAdams, 1993). In addition to analysing the dynamics of the narration of selfhood, one must understand what change means in the life of the person in question; what is the change and in what ways it is progressive? In modern pedagogical research, the concept of professional development is related to the concept of reflection (Korthagen & Vasalos; Larrivee, according to Stenberg, 2010). The reflection is understanding the various dimensions, framework and cultural development of one's own profession. It is work on professional identity; conscious actions aim to deepen and advance one's own professional skills (Hyry-Beihammer et al., 2013, 156–157; Pohjola, 2012, 98). Studying and questioning oneself and committing to the ideas that one deems to be right may demand a crisis of selfhood. Thus, after a crisis, an individual may be confronted by new and unfamiliar choices and they are not based solely on cultural expectations (see, Marcia, 1966; Malinen, 2000, 62–63; Clancy & Dollinger, 1993). According to Mezirow (1995, 17–37), contradictions and problems in general enable change; however, under some conditions a process follows that pushes an individual to gain more self-knowledge, to question possible figures of authority and to learn to live a more harmonious life. The prerequisite for the change in this is taking responsibility and avoiding an outside authority's excessive influence to preserve integrity of one's self (Mezirow, 1995, 17–37).

In this study, the instrument teacher's process of self-narration extends over her musical education and life as an instrument teacher. These experiences are mirrored with the time and story as Syrjälä (2010, 252) and McCarthy (2007) represent the self-narration's entanglement with time and stories. The essence of being an instrument teacher can be represented by narration. Thus, the portrayal of being an instrument teacher includes playing music, interacting with people, maintaining a pedagogical rhythm or events in a class, teaching an instrument as part of the curriculum and being an instrument teacher as a private and public persona (Bernard, 2005; McCarthy, 2007). A synthesis of the literature concerning narrative identity, being a musical educator and the narrative nature of the field of musical education can help to perceive the phenomena within the instrument teacher's story of life.

3. Study Design

The basis of this study is to describe “Helmi’s” professional journey as profoundly as possible. In this study the interviewee’s name has been altered and she is referred as Helmi. The research data has been collected by using the episodic depth-interview method. The important episodes from the life story are formed based on the episodic interview; they are represented from the perspective of the dynamics of constructing professional identity, the progression of professional growth and life as an instrument teacher. It is important to consider how Helmi has experienced the important parts and moments of her life. The research initiative was guided by three questions:

- In what ways is the narrative identity of the instrument teacher formed in her life story?
- What is an instrument teacher’s professional growth and which factors influence it the life story?
- What is instrument teaching according to a person’s life story?

The recollection of Helmi’s own experiences in the interview and the re-narration of the experiences into Helmi’s life story unfold both narratively and paradigmatically. The paradigmatic argumentation is truthful and authentic. Narrative knowing is focused on specific activities and paradigmatic knowing on customary activities. In paradigmatic knowing the information is found in the individual’s single words and the narrative information in stories with plots (Polkinghorne, 1995, 11.) In Bruner’s (1986, 11) thinking there are similarities with Flick’s (2014, 273–274) division of two kinds of knowledge: narrative/episodic knowledge and semantic knowledge. Episodic information is empirical and connected with concrete situations and circumstances. Semantic knowledge is based on concepts, assumptions and relationships between concepts formed from those experiences (Bruner, 1986, 11; Flick, 2014, 274).

An episodic, in-depth interview was chosen as a research method because it combines both conventions of knowing used in narrative inquiry. Secondly, forming the professional identity and understanding the process requires deep reminiscence and analysis and an in-depth interview is well suited to analysing past events of which the person may be dimly aware or that may contain delicate information (Siekkinen, 2010, 45; Flick, 1999, 2014).

The interview consisted of Helmi’s free narration and questions that arose from that narration. It also included direct questions based on semantic information concerning themes about which we needed more information (cf. Flick, 1999; Flick, 2014, 273–275). Thus, the interview was both the data and the subject of discussion in the interview (see, Rapley, 2004, 19–20).

The interpretation of the data is based on interpreting the subject’s inner cognitive processes and schemes and the interpretation formed in interaction with the researchers (Gergen, M & K, 2006). The narratives were analysed based on paradigmatic knowing or otherwise using thematic classification and categorisation (Polkinghorne, 1995).

At the time of the interview, in the spring of 2014, Helmi had been retired for one year, after a long career of teaching. Thus, she can be considered as a true professional which increases the reliability of the study (see, Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, 88). This study is a case study and the life story is unique; thus, the aim of the study is not to generalize. Usually the subject in a case study is a special case and the aim is to attain deep and comprehensive information (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001, 58).

Understanding the role of the interviewers in producing biographical information increases the reliability of the research. According to Bamberg (2006), in a biographical interview there is a dimension in which the narrative is formed in interaction between two people and the focus is immediate. Understanding that the researchers’ own narrative voices can be heard both in the moment of the interview and in the process of re-narration increases the reliability of this study (see, Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001, p. 41–49, 59; Yu, 2013).

4. The construction of Helmi’s story of personal and professional growth

In Helmi’s childhood and early youth the process of constructing the story of self is an interaction between her personal relationship with music, the imperfection of educational relationships and a challenging home life. In that discussion striving towards selfhood stands out: *“My childhood with music was really natural. I was just improvising and making my own songs. I went to see a lady who gave me some piano lessons. It was basically simple playing because she was no professional. I had no other experience to compare it to and my music making*

came easily to me. . . . I was lonely and the piano was my friend". An inborn relationships with music and playing it and the relationship with the instrument were a positive influence on the integrity of the story of self for those matters helped her to endure loneliness and a feeling of outsideness. Here the story of the self's success is focused on the individual and more specifically on the person's musicality. It is strong in relation to the narrative environment and in Helmi's story of a challenging home life.

At the age of 14, Helmi is given instrument teaching for the first time; therefore, a change occurs in her narrative environment. Later the teaching relationships is ended without a proper reason and Helmi is left alone with her need to play: *"She quit my lessons at the most important time when I needed so badly to improve my playing skills"*. The termination of the teaching is due to the injustice of the teacher and Helmi feels bitterness. Helmi strives for selfhood in her story, but because of the events her feelings of bitterness are very strong. The integrity of Helmi's story of self requires time and both compensatory social and individual experiences. Helmi describes one moment of integrity: *"One time I played in front of my previous teacher and just felt proud; I thought that then she could see that I was still going strong even though she left me"*.

In Helmi's childhood her growth is connected to her complete attachment to her instrument. Helmi seeks something good and finds it in a relationship with the piano. She describes her playing *"as natural as talking"; like part of me*". Inborn playing skills and positive feelings towards music in addition to the warm relationship with the lady who gave her piano lessons positively affect Helmi's growth. Helmi describes her visits to the lady: *"I am so happy that I could meet a person [who was] 'a smiling face' and 'somebody waiting for me'"*.

After high school just before vocational studies, Helmi is briefly trained for the entrance exams to Sibelius Academy, the highest level of study for a music educator in Finland and she becomes aware of the fact that one can make profession out of music. A brief but very warm and friendly relationship with her tutor is significant for her: *"She was a professional and knew about the Sibelius Academy where I could apply. She made me aware of piano playing as a profession"*. Most importantly Helmi describes her as *"a piano friend"*. Helmi's endeavours to achieve selfhood are now accompanied by her endeavours to identify with her tutor.

The narrative environment changes when Helmi begins studying at the faculty of music education in the Sibelius Academy. Begin accepted at the Academy is an important milestone for Helmi because it solidifies concepts of music within her that had earlier carried her. However, in her studies for the first time in her life she is compared to others who share the same interests and have been determined in their instrument studies. Helmi's endeavours to identify with them produce a feeling of difference, lost opportunities and *"quite deep sad feelings"* as she sees that her peers are progressed further than she is. Helmi wonders: *"How far could I have gone with my talent if I had received proper teaching?"* During her studies she realizes that piano can also be taught, not just played and that the teachers are different from each other. Helmi finds a part in her that is interested in teaching and as she strives towards selfhood being a teacher becomes a more personal idea for her.

After two years of studying at the faculty of music education, a great change occurs in Helmi's life. She begins to receive education where technical fundamentals are emphasized and amateurism is rooted out. The approval received from the teacher is at this point stronger than cherishing her freedom. In this way the teacher as a social source in the story of self dominates Helmi's conceptions about being a teacher: Helmi describes her experience: *"She became a guru to me. I couldn't let my intuition lead after that because I so admired the teacher who had lifted me up from this uncertainty"*. During Helmi's studies her story of self is constructed about the interaction between her as a musician and an instrument teacher, her instrument teacher's authority and her relationships with her peers. The integrity of Helmi's story of self during her studies includes becoming enthusiastic and motivated about her teacher role models, being happy about her teaching relationships and having her own epiphanies. Simultaneously, the integrity of her story of self is challenged by a feeling of difference.

During her studies her two sides as a musician and as a music educator grow when Helmi begins to receive high-quality teaching on a regular basis. Her cognitive capabilities develop with age and thus she begins to learn new concepts, ideas and skills quickly. During her studies her understanding of her own inner needs and desires deepens. Spiritual opening, facing her uncertainties, becoming motivated, passing time and gathering experiences lead Helmi to grow as a person, a musician and an educator.

In the early-stages of her teaching career after completing a degree examination, Helmi participates in a music master class where musicians teach other musicians. She participates in the course as a teacher and a listener. At the master class while listening to an older colleague she has an epiphany. She realizes that she has regarded her former teachers' theories too highly: *"At that moment I knew that there was something I hadn't understood yet. Nothing was taken away from my earlier realizations, but I gained something new. All my work history had been somehow a*

compromise of the two teacher examples and epiphanies. That experience has led to further realizations in my work and has helped me to achieve my goals". Helmi's teaching has, with the help of her mental maturation, "resulted in epiphanies as an adult based on earlier experiences and not only intuition". With two strong examples, her experience became more wide-ranging than before and the negotiation between her story of the self's individual and social sources became more equal. In her own teaching relationships Helmi's story of self is on the one hand constructed based on emphasizing individual factors, her own capabilities and aptitude, and on the other hand social factors, acknowledging student as a holistic being.

As Helmi's career proceeds, strong personal life values prove significant relative to her life story. Helmi struggles to find a job, a place in the work community and justification of her views on teaching. Helmi describes her journey: *"Because of my values music has never been the most important part of my life. Disappointments, people treating me badly and other injustices have never overpowered me. Without my values, I couldn't have handled things so well".* Helmi's sense of being different from others is in relation to the social sources of her story of self; music culture and musical tradition, institution and colleagues all set her apart from others. Thus, Helmi's reflections on her educational history are once again present when she tries to construct the story of self in relation to her social environment: *"I didn't always understand why I had such talents as improvisation skills when they are not taken into consideration when instrument teacher posts are filled. People who had trained since early childhood gained the best jobs, which still doesn't mean that they would have an understanding of the teaching situation. Difficulties widen your perspective."* In adulthood, as an instrument teacher Helmi's story of self is formed in interaction between personal features, capabilities, skills and the surrounding music culture. In adulthood the integrity of Helmi's story of self includes accepting her own life story, humbling herself and proportioning her skills and experience with general life values. The imbalance in her life story retains loneliness in the work community, where she finds unfairness in the job search and evaluation of her degrees. Later on, Helmi understands that she cannot have all her first choices, not in work or life in general. Generally, Helmi feels that her intuition has served her well: *"As time passes that bitterness of not getting a sufficient education as a child has lost its power. I have begun to accept that everyone has his or her own starting point. When I look back, I can't say that I would have chosen differently in my life. I have always used my intuition in my choices and eventually it has led to something good".*

During her career as an instrument teacher, Helmi grows significantly as a music educator. Her teaching skills and understanding of education's diverse dimensions grows. Professional growth entails being conscious of the influence of different starting points on work life: *"The way I used to live with a piano and music as a child could be seen in the last piano classes I gave. That is kind of a life cycle".* The growth in her profession occurs in relation to the life of an instrument teacher in general. The relationship between being conscious of self and the progression in growing is in Helmi's opinion knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses, facing uncertainty and developing oneself even in areas of discomfort. Being conscious of self is trusting oneself more comprehensively and having confidence in working: *"You just need to trust yourself and go on, live with your eyes and ears open and use your intuitive skills".*

5. Helmi's experience as an instrument teacher

In this study, being an instrument teacher includes conceptions of playing music, musicality and musical information. Being an instrument teacher also covers conceptions of teaching skills and students' learning. It is conceptions concerning one's individual teacher persona and acting as a teacher and a public persona. In this study being an instrument teacher covers a person's view of human being in general and conceptions about the values of teaching, musical information and music.

According to the conception of an instrument teacher, playing music is both an action and a situation. The situation where music is played is creative and interactional. Playing music can be personal or an action between or among individuals. During this action, information about music is constructed and realised. Music in itself does not play a major role in being a music teacher, but it is more of a tool to musicking.

According to the conceptions of an instrument teacher, musicality requires technical skills that include the human bodily dimension. Musicality motivates a person to play music, but the most important factor is, *"How should the instrument be handled correctly?"* According to an instrument teacher's conception, music requires

spiritual openness and the presence of feelings. The value of musical information is included in playing music when through emotion live music is born. Thus, the vividness of the music is born as a combination of musical information and emotion. According to Helmi, the presence of emotion in playing music is part of the meaningfulness of being an instrument teacher: *“When I am connected with my emotions, I feel like I can be true to myself”*.

In an instrument teacher’s conception, the teaching situation is most of all an interaction between people playing music. The contact that is born in that situation demonstrates the value of teaching and is also the meaning of teaching in the instrument teacher’s opinion. In her opinion the value of music is defined based on the feelings in the teaching situation. According to Helmi, *“Piano pedagogy is for humanity and life. At best there is a contact between people that makes an impact on a person’s life”*.

In this study, the contact that is formed in a teaching situation is this instrument teacher’s opinion a space between two personas and it covers her conception of people. This contact is based on openness and equality between people. In the space between personas the values guide the process of setting goals and the aim of setting goals is to develop a motivation to learn. In the instrument teacher’s opinion the space formed between two personas makes learning happen. In her opinion, learning is initiated by the learning contact: word, emotion and physicality. Helmi notes: *“A teacher needs to be emotionally open and enthusiastic because that is how a learner gets affected. A teacher should go to go through examples together side by side at the learner’s level. Then the student is not only getting excited, but also learning. That is quite mystical”*. The teacher’s feeling of meaningfulness follows when a student is learning: *“When a student learns it makes a teacher carry on through the years and feel happy and love the job.”*

The teaching situation encompasses a teacher’s teaching skills. In this study, the instrument teacher’s opinion is that teaching skills are inspirations born during playing music, a personal relationship with music and the result of conscious actions and confidence. Conscious action means transferring inspiration and confidence which is followed by a feeling of meaningfulness.

In this study being an instrument teacher is both being in the role of a teacher in public situations and also being a private person. An instrument teacher’s public role is mainly defined in class; however, in a way the private persona is also present. In class the tradition, the curriculum, and the framework of teaching are on display. The traditions retain a repertory of the instrument teacher’s opinion. The curriculum retains the teacher’s and the students’ shared plans. The teaching skills on display in the class are her conceptions and knowing different musical content, but also in being faithful to her own persona. Helmi mentions *“personal resources”* and *“art field”* as she believes music is *“so much about how a person hears”*.

The instrument teacher’s general life values define the nature of the teaching relationship. In the teacher’s profession, the role of being a teacher becomes visible in a values. They frame the actions in a teaching relationship. However, encountering a student in teaching requires identifying with the student’s situation and moving out of one’s role. Helmi says: *“A teacher shouldn’t try to use students for personal ambitions to gain some advantage. There should be respect for a student’s own life”*.

The instrument teacher in this study works very strongly with her persona. A role that is socially on display is tiring if the person is not committed to the self, according to her values. Helmi notes that she could get tired if she *“couldn’t be true to herself”* in her teaching. However, contradictions in roles socially on display are not simply a negative matter, but they are issues that challenge and maintain interest in the profession. According to Helmi, *“I have to be really conscious about what I am doing. I can’t just go to work. I need to have something to give”*. According to this study, being an instrument teacher as a private person is living by one’s own life values and conventions. The teacher’s way to live is to be both loyal and committed to herself. Teaching students to play an instrument by living according to one’s own life values makes the profession feel meaningful.

6. Conclusions and discussion

Helmi’s story of self is constructed in the interaction between individual and social sources. Endeavours towards integrity define the success of the sources in constructing her identity. Maturity, personal characteristics, changing surroundings, time and coincidence have an influence on Helmi as she strives for selfhood and identifies with the people around her. In addition, the experiences concerning the consequences of those endeavours depend on those matters (see, McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1996; Ricoeur, 1992).

Based on this study, it can be seen that the endeavours aiming at integrity cannot be simplified so that people in

general naturally strive for integrity. The endeavours for integrity well from people's need to define themselves. The main question concerns the necessity of questions concerning identity. According to Eteläpelto & Vähäsantanen (2010, 28) to achieve integrity there has to be time and space for defining one's identity (Eteläpelto & Vähäsantanen, 2010, 28). Hall (1999, 13–15) discusses about learning one's identity by defining each moment as it is (Hall, 1999, 13–15).

Trying to achieve a whole story and failure in doing that define what events and matters that the instrument teacher brings out in her narrative. What conclusions can be drawn from her success with individual and social sources? In this study the success of the sources in constructing the story of self stand for the ways a source furthers constructing a whole story at a given time. The challenges and setbacks at work could have led to a story that emphasises getting stuck because of and fears and failures. The story could have become a victim story and thus would not have been whole. This kind of story was avoided because the instrument teacher defined herself with values outside of the professional field (see, Honkanen, 2001, 10). She discovered that she would not have been able to open herself up as much in the interview if she had still been working. Therefore, retirement can be seen to have given more perspective to the instrument teacher's reflection (see, Moss & Pittaway, 2013; Weiler, according to McCarthy, 2007).

In Helmi's life story, integrity sometimes calls for achieving the aims of selfhood and identification. In the instrument teacher's life there are times and events when an individual or social source cannot be successful without the existence or opposition of the other. For example, her feeling of uniqueness appears as difference when Helmi does not receive both personal and outside recognition.

However, the integrity in Helmi's life story does not mean that everything would be perfectly in place. Although Helmi would not achieve the kind of definitions of herself that she had been trying to achieve, it does not mean that her story of self could not be whole. Often either the success of an individual or social source is enough to uphold the story of a life. Then it is essential to learn how the individual has managed to achieve harmony among the sources. Sometimes this can mean settling for something or acceptance of circumstances and a more powerful emphasis on individual tendencies instead of social acceptance. The imbalance is formed if an individual has no power over constructing his or her story or is unable to define the self either individually or socially. Then the sources of the narrative are not successful and an interactive relationship with the targets of the endeavours is not formed (see, Mezirow, 1995, 17–37).

According to this study, being conscious of the self occurs over a long time or within a single moment relative to the instrument teacher's maturity, spiritual openness, cognitive capacity or purposeful use of energy. It happens by listening to bodily messages, intuition and by developing the skills to handle feelings or otherwise realistic sensations about the self and surroundings. Previous experiences have an effect on being conscious and maintaining the motivation to assimilate. In the light of Helmi's life story, the progress of change is a maturing process that proceeds from knowing herself and committing herself to the sensation of freedom or autonomy in the fields of maturity (see, Knowles, 1975, 18; Anttila, 2004, 51–52; Stenberg, 2010; Bogler, according to Brunetti, Strong & Yoshidan, 2014).

In Helmi's opinion being an instrument teacher is mainly acting as a private person while traditions influence the matters valued in the work. Teacher-student-contact between personas is formed in Helmi's life story through playing music and feeling what lives in it. The contact between people in teaching defines the value of teaching and music and students' learning. Instrument teaching is offered to give tools for life (see, Huhtanen & Hirvonen, 2013, 44; Hyyry-Beihammer, 2013, 158; Lindström, 2009, 107; Pellegrino, 2009; Reimer, 1989, 151–166; Väkevää & Westerlund, 2009, 95).

In Helmi's story the linkage between her persona and teaching is due to the experiences of meaningfulness and feeling better at work, the non-existent information given by the education authorities and the scarcity of interactions between colleagues. Dimensions of working in a community are visible in instrument teacher's work and the teacher can gain a feeling meaningfulness through these dimensions. Communal and cultural dimensions should increase feeling better at work. One way to reform the culture of instrument teaching could be adding methods to workplaces and educational programmes that aim to find meaningfulness in reforming the culture of instrument teaching from an individual's perspective (see, Koskeniemi, 1978, 196). Then the fact that every person is valuable for him- or herself would be respected. The sensibility of living as a persona is born in touch with others as valuable personas (see, Buber, 1993).

The narrative portraits of individual music teachers can sharpen our knowledge of teachers' professional identity and personal life by providing conceptual, cultural and historical stories as tools that make self-interpretation and

identity more meaningful and complete. This case study is only one narrative story of an instrument teacher; more research is needed to learn more about music teachers' identity and personal growth.

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